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BOUNCING BACK:
ERIKSON, MASLOW AND RECOVERY FROM DIVORCE

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Counseling for recovery from divorce may be significantly enhanced if a general model of emotional health/deficiency can be applied. This article introduces an amalgam of Erik Erikson's developmental stages and Abraham Maslow's motivational hierarchy as a means of understanding the rigors of marital dissolution. The paradigm promotes client perception of motivational need-level as the primary phase in the re-ascent toward health and actualization.

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Bouncing Back:

Erikson, Maslow and Recovery from Divorce

The Ayatollah Freud guided us brilliantly and inexorably toward the ultimate Why.

Half a century of humankind has inched its way, free associating and transferring, into a subtle analytic consciousness. That may not be bad, but it's not the only way to be.

The guru, Perls, instructed us that his Gestalt therapy stood on the two legs of How and Now.

To ask the Why question takes one out of his feelings and into his head. There are no judgments in Gestalt Therapy. And that's good.

The saintly Rogers nudged us gently, painlessly, into a changed consciousness. We face a troubled world asking nothing, and focus instead on understanding and clarifying.

If we empty our bodies of need and cleanse our heads of analysis, we are perceived by the client as devoting total energy to him. He becomes his own source of heat and light and change. What finer outcome for therapy?

Skinner, the social engineer, takes us to our pastoral heaven effortlessly, benevolently. Our good deeds are rewarded, our demons ignored, and our juices flow steady in the certainty and constancy of paternal guidance.

It is a fact that none of these germinal thinkers in human behavior applied exclusive energy to the problems of marital discord and dissolution, though some addressed themselves to it intermittently.

Nor did the man who, perhaps, may be considered the source person for the current existential-humanistic emphasis, Abraham Maslow.

It was Maslow who switched our perspective from mental illness to mental health; who gave us a hierarchy of human needs emerging sequentially and developmentally in place of the single primary drives of Freud (pleasure), Adler (power), Frankl (meaning), and Combs (adequacy).

But in no instance did Maslow specifically offer us options when a woman says "I don't love you anymore," or a man says, "I'm bored."

But, specifics or not, Maslow's insights can be powerful allies in our understanding of the moods and stages that a ruptured partnership spawns. And so can the ideas of Erik Erikson.

In the discussion which follows, I plan to integrate Erikson's thoughts with Maslow's; and in what may appear to be a bold presumption, apply them both in a theory of reaction to the death of a marriage.

Identity and Intimacy

In Erikson's developmental stages we see that the adolescent reaches a point where he must engage in self-definition. The old parental admonitions and family rules represent external control; they would keep the adolescent dependent and child-like. He rebels, takes emotional and sometimes physical risks, flouts familial standards and, in some instances, society's laws. In short, he sets out to fly for himself, to find his own identity.

Confronting, and often painful, as this task is, as the person struggles through to young adulthood a new task emerges. When self-identity crystallizes, the struggle to create intimacy begins. As Erikson put it, the task becomes the conflict between intimacy and isolation.

It is then fairly clear that intimacy could not be established until the goal of identity had been adequately reached. For how could one give of himself in an intimate way if he did not know who he was? So, the equation always read: Identity before Intimacy.

Using Erikson's formula as a backdrop, I began to observe that in the lives of many of my clients and, I might add, in my own, whenever a crisis occurred: the sudden loss of a job, the traumatic death of a close, significant figure, the dissolution of a marriage--the person invariably repaired back to a desperate need for identity.

One man whose wife ended their twenty year marriage told me, "I was absolutely lost. For all those years I was father, husband, family man, gardener, repairman--for broken possessions and wounded feelings--nurturer, protector.... Then, all of a sudden there was only me. When I was married, if a colleague or a friend asked if I'd like to go out to dinner one evening

my answer was, 'I don't know.' I had to find out what everybody was doing; I had to find out the schedule. But even more, I realized that I really did not know what I'd like to do. When I became single, all of a sudden I just had to think for myself, no obligations, no one to check with; what would I, me alone, like to do? It was like finding out who I was all over again."

Indeed, part of this man's doubling back to the identity task as the prime motivator included re-defining his role in or out of a family; but beyond that, it also meant re-discovering some of his own repressed, and long-vagrant, feelings and drives. He added:

"It was so hard to accept that one week I was my kids' protector, and the next week I wasn't even in the house. A couple of months before my wife wanted to know every place I went, what hotel I was in, when the plane arrived--and then all of a sudden it felt like nobody even cared where I was. I'd go someplace and think, 'Nobody in the world knows I'm here.' What an adjustment that was.

"Finally I realized I needed to replace what I lost--I mean there were lots of needs coming up that had been taken care of for all those years: sex, closeness, feelings of love and comraderie as part of a family. So, I connected with this young woman and we had a crazy, wild, passionate half year. But something wasn't right. There wasn't a real closeness, a real intimacy, and we eventually just spread apart and let it go."

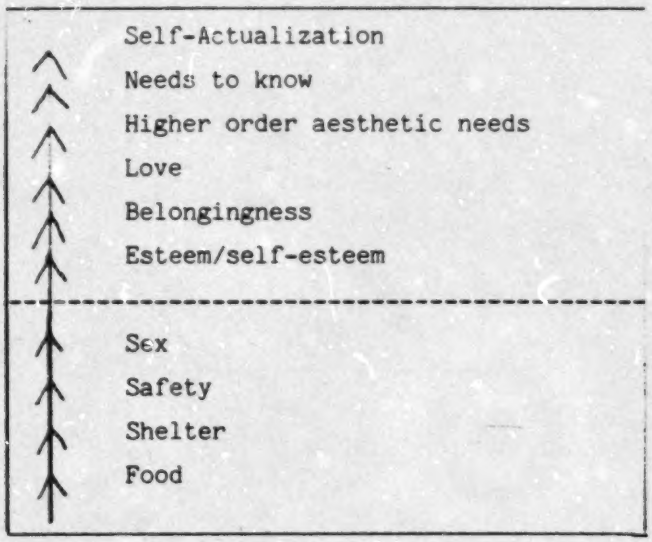
This man's story is fairly typical of the pattern I've come to see when a life crisis accompanying marital dissolution occurs: a retreat back to an intense need for re-defining the self, i.e., identity; a clutching at pseudo-intimacy, including a re-awakened focus on the no-longer available sexual and belonging needs; and a re-affirmation of the Erikson equation that, indeed, identity must come prior to intimacy. Said axiomatically: at any time there is a life crisis, we fall back to identity as our primary task, and the old equation holds, Identity before Intimacy.

Maslow's Hierarchy

But one searches for identity on many levels. In the death of a partnership one might ask: "Who am I now as a single person, as a sexual person, as a social person, as a man or woman on the town, as a member of a new cultural group; and on an internal level, as a valuable human being, held in esteem by others and recognizing my own worth?"

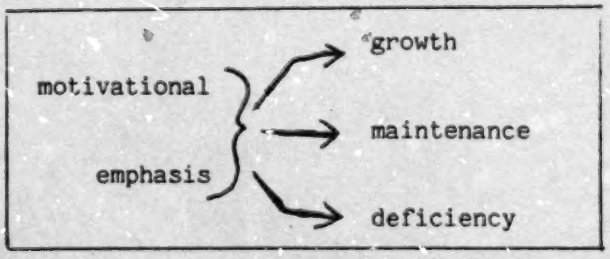
I have found that Maslow's motivational hierarchy provides a useful model upon which to project a theory of recovery from traumatic life crises.

Below is a loose re-structuring of Maslow's paradigm:



The model is characterized by needs emerging in ascending order. That is, when a lower order need is at least minimally satisfied, the next higher need emerges as a focus of energy. For example, when we are amply fed and sheltered, feel safe and sexually satisfied, our more psychological needs--those above the dotted line--clamor for attention. Likewise, when we feel esteemed and worthwhile, have a sense of belonging to something other than ourselves, and feel loved and loving, we are freed to appreciate with more of our focused energy the aesthetic beauties around us, and to pursue our curiosities about anomalies and the unknown. Ultimately, when all the other needs have a way to be addressed, we reach Maslow's notion of the highest motivational level, self-actualization, or a growing toward our own perfection.

People who are functioning at this highest level can be said to be growth motivated rather than deficiency motivated.



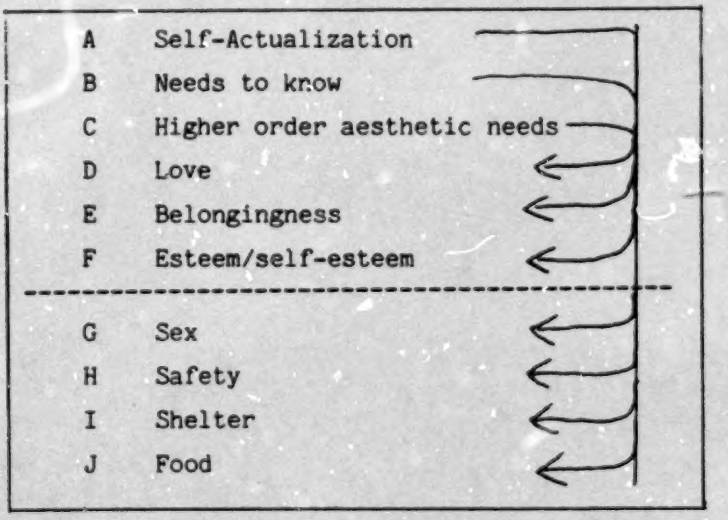
Applying the above chart, the concept of motivational emphasis becomes a product of time, a particular aspect of one's life, and emotional state. That is, in a specific week, dealing with my relationship with women, and given my state of anxiety over a ruptured partnership, I could be said to be deficiency motivated. In another specific week, dealing with my professional relationships, and given a recent salutary experience of presenting a highly successful collegial colloquium, I could be said to be growth motivated. Motivational level is item-specific and time-specific.

Maintenance motivation is required of al. of us. We must do the laundry, pay the bills, cut the grass. Our hope is to keep the maintenance tasks under control, to conquer our deficiencies, and to be able to focus maximum energy on growth. I would much rather plant new flowers than either cut the grass or pull the weeks....

But the fact is, the weeds grow back. Our deficiencies are recurrent. Our energies are constantly being siphoned away from growth to repair deficits. When people come for therapy, they are largely deficiency motivated. They focus on what is wrong in their lives and in their relationships.

Repairing Deficiencies

By looking again at the Maslow hierarchy, with the arrows now descending, we can see how deficiency motivation pulls us away from the higher order growth needs:



Now, if we examine this model against the case cited earlier, of the man whose wife chose to end a twenty-year marriage, we can see some valuable applications. Note his words: "Finally I realized I needed to replace what I lost--I mean there were lots of needs coming up that had been taken care of for all those years: sex, closeness, feelings of love and comraderie as part of a family."

If we presume this man was of moderately high energy and a well-functioning person prior to his crisis, we might place him up around B and C on the chart, with perhaps even some A motivation in some areas of his life. Thus, we would expect his love and belongingness and esteem needs to have been at least minimally met, as well as the lower order physiological needs.

But now, in crisis, he describes his loss of a regular sexual partner as elevating his focus on sexual needs; his loss of closeness and love as intensifying his motivation to go back to attend to love needs; his expulsion from being part of a family as a threat to his sense of belonging.

In short, he has become deficiency motivated in all these areas and, of course, in the area of self-esteem. I have heard people say, "If my own partner, the one I've known most intimately all these years, doesn't want me I must be worthless."

In keeping with the Maslow notion of the lowest order need requiring attention before the next higher can be addressed profitably, it becomes clear that, starting with J above, the person in crisis will regress back to the most elemental level at which a deficiency is perceived. I have observed that, in divorce, women are often more concerned with the shelter and safety (security) issues than men. Men, on the other hand, begin their deficiency repair most often at the sexual level. When they again feel like--in Maslow's terms--good and lusty animals, they focus, remarkably faithfully, in ascending order on their esteem needs, belonging needs, love, etc.

I have often heard a wounded partner say, "Who gives a damn about music or art? Every song they play on the radio is about lost love. It's like a knife through the heart." And in considering the visual-aesthetic needs, a hurt, deficiency motivated person, when asked, will often answer, "Beautiful sunset? No, I wasn't aware of the sunset."

It becomes more and more clear that our energy for growth and for the higher order needs is stifled when we are plagued by the deficiencies that follow crisis. Identity becomes paramount, and only through addressing and ameliorating our deficiencies can we uncover the new person.

The Therapy

Marital dissolution is a stresser. When the separate partners absorb the anxieties of the conflict, their wounds and losses force them back to where their most basic needs clamor for attention.

A woman in therapy might ask, "How do I meet a man? I don't really like to go to bars, and just generally going somewhere by myself feels awkward, not to mention fear." The response I find useful is something like, "What are your needs? Where are your priorities? Can you get clear on what aspect of yourself you want to serve?" Very often, the client will then show bewilderment and wonder. And Axiom Number One emerges:

A person wounded in divorce will likely have, at best, a fuzzy awareness of his/her own need level.

Therapy, therefore, involves the building of as acute an awareness as possible of the lowest order need that is currently unmet. If a person is sexually deficient and is, of course, feeling deprived (even subconsciously) by that deficit, a direct focus on, for example, belongingness needs may be a misdirection of energy; the sexual needs will grate and grind, and contaminate the higher order pursuit.

The example fits here of the divorced man cited earlier who connected passionately with a woman immediately after divorce, searching on one level for love and intimacy and on another for gratification of sexual passion; the former was misguided while the latter succeeded. As sexual identity again firms and satisfaction is accessible, that need becomes background, and the intimacy needs become foreground and attainable.

Another man said to me, "But, I'm so hurt that it makes me cautious. I hate that. I don't want to be cautious, but I know that if I try to connect with someone either she or I could get hurt again." A useful response here could be, "It's really neat that you're so aware of your feelings. Now I wonder--with all that awareness--if you're willing to face the fact that you

just expressed a desire to avoid risk rather than climb the ladder again to your own full functioning?" And so, Axiom Number Two is:

> After awareness, change can only occur if the desire to risk becomes stronger than the desire to be safe.

So, the post-divorce therapy focuses on festering awareness, re-building desire, and now, the final step, stimulating action.

One woman told me "I have my needs clearly in focus, and I'm sure I want to get moving again. But I feel stuck. With all my good motivations I just don't get myself off the dime. It's so disappointing." A valid response could be, "I hear that your desire to fly high again is strong and ripe. First of all, I'm not sure I believe that, because you aren't flying high, so I'm not convinced you're ready to leave the cocoon and take the risks that are involved. but if you insist on the readiness of your desires, show me. What actions are you willing to take to bounce back?" Axiom Number Three is:

> Awareness and desire are necessary, but not sufficient, factors in recovery from crisis; in the final analysis, only action effects change.

The therapist acts as a stimulus to change. Life-crisis therapy does not end with insight. The recovering person must engage in dynamic behavior to satisfy, for example, a need to belong or a need to feel valuable. Only in that active new movement will the person discover that he is the source of his own heat and light and...actualization.

And the therapist, first by keeping in mind the growth model, and secondly by spurring the client with focused stimulation, becomes a therapeutic instrument affecting the ascent back toward self-actualization.

Epilogue

It is important in the Erikson/Maslow model to emphasize the critical variable of client perception. It does little good for the counselor addressing the client in crisis to know his deficiency level if the client, himself, does not become aware of it.

The primary therapeutic mode, then, is to assist the client to comprehend his crisis-spawned deficits and the specific hierarchic point at which to focus his recovery.

It is alo apparent in working through this model that at certain differential points in the same person's life, the same tasks are viewed (perception) at different motivational levels. An example which one newly divorced man offered told of how miserable he was when he first moved into his apartment. He could not get himself to vacuum; he failed to water his plants; his bedsheets were rarely changed; his dirty clothes were piled high in the closets. Maintenance tasks all, and viewed in such a way as to increase this man's sense of deficiency. Eight months later, after much focused therapy and, of course, a settling of the dust in his new life situation, he told me: "Man, Saturday I took my clothes to the laundromat and brought along my portable radio so I could hear the ballgame. There was this neat woman there and a couple of guys, and before long we were all folding our clothes and cheering together for the Dodgers."

The bottom paragraph in using the Erikson/Maslow paradigm as a conduit for repair and renascence is that people in the lofty wellness of growth motivation see joy and value even in tasks which, at best, are maintenance type, and which troubled people view through the spectacles of deficiency. And certainly, with the sharpening of your client's perception as the medium, the ascent from lower order deficiency motivation to higher order growth motivation is the ultimate goal that will once again confirm his identity and guide him toward his (and everyone's) crowning, transcendent quest for intimacy and actualization.

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